

Royal Botanic Gardens Kew

Inspiring futures

Tom Heller



Tell us about your job

Islands Conservation Partnerships Co-ordinator. My job involves coordinating projects working to better understand the plant life of the islands of UK Overseas Territories. This involves working with international partners to gather data and samples on plants found in the wild in these places, identify and study them, and conserve them in seed banks and botanic gardens.

Why is science important in your career?

There is so much we don't know about the world, but also a crisis in the loss of biodiversity. Robust evidence is key to finding answers to both issues, and this is gained through a rigorous scientific approach.

What is your average work day like?

When I'm in the office, my day can involve anything from corresponding with international partners, identifying plant specimens, processing data, or planning my next field trip. I typically spend 6-8 weeks each year overseas on fieldwork, visiting forests of interest, recording data and collecting specimens, which is physically demanding, but the highlight of a botanist's life!

Did you go to university? If so, what did you study? If not, what did you do after leaving school?

I studied for a bachelor's degree in Botany at the University of Bristol, before doing a master's degree in the Biodiversity and Taxonomy of Plants at the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh and Edinburgh University.

What sort of personality traits do you have that help you in your career?

Probably the same answer many of my colleagues would give: a passion for plants. A genuine and enduring interest in plants and conservation.

What helped you get your role at Kew?

Having completed my master's degree, which was in a relevant topic, was important. I also think my enthusiasm for the post came through in the interview, for which I had prepared well so my nerves didn't get the better of me!

What advice would you give to someone considering a career like yours?

Try to follow a path that makes the most of your passions and skills, but always with an eye to where the gaps and likely opportunities are in your chosen field. Don't be afraid to approach scientists for help and career advice. Perseverance is also important!

What do you want people to know about your work?

1. Plants are important to humanity
2. There's an awful lot yet to learn about plant diversity
3. If we want to slow the loss of plant diversity, we need to understand and document it

Want a career that grows?

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